

How to Succeed in the Classroom

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“Sweet!” you think to yourself as you peruse the freshly printed syllabus of your very first college course—no attendance, no homework, and no quizzes. The only thing you have to worry about is a test EIGHT weeks into class. Score. “See ya in eight weeks,” you think to yourself as you glide out of class and glance at this imbecile of a professor. What a joke.

Eight weeks into class, however, you will probably be singing a different tune.

True, college classes are structured a little differently—no, scratch that—very differently than high school ones, but that doesn’t mean they don’t require the same amount, if not more, effort than high school classes.

While settling into your new environment and relishing the new found freedom of college, it is very easy to overlook the importance of taking responsibility for your academics. At the close of high school, you leave behind homeroom, homework checks, assigned seats, a note from mom when you’re absent, and yes, even hall passes. Indeed, it’s a whole new ball game. A ball game with a lot more freedom, and a lot fewer mandatory holiday assemblies. But along with this new found academic freedom comes academic responsibility, which, despite temptation, can not be left until the last week of the semester.

First, staying on top of your academics is fairly obvious, yet it is surprisingly very easy to overlook; go to class AND do the reading! Just because there is no roll call in a three hundred person lecture, doesn’t mean that you aren’t expected to go to class and do the work. And yes, I am aware that “going to class” can have a loose interpretation. For many it can mean entering class, sitting in the back, plopping your head onto your notebook and falling asleep. Needless to say, this is not the translation I have in mind. It is important to go to class both physically and mentally.

Why? Because once the bi-semester test or paper comes along, the professor could very well expect to you to be familiar with both the material from the reading, as well as the material covered in his or her lectures. Tricky, I know, but often there are different topics covered in the reading than the ones covered in class, and you will be expected to be familiar with both.

The second step is pacing yourself. It is important to do all the reading, but don’t attempt to do it all in one night. There aren’t many individuals who could plow through

all 542 pages of The Iliad in one night and still wake up refreshed and coherent enough to write an in-class essay on it. To prevent nightmarish scenarios like this, you must look at your reading assignments as soon as you get them and leave yourself enough time to read them through at a reasonable pace (e.g., don’t schedule Moby Dick to be read in the two-hour break between your classes).

Third, make yourself aware of your resources. Find out when your professor has office hours and what is the best way to reach him or her. Often college classes are bigger and less personalized than those in high school. Therefore, if you want help, it’s up to you to find it.

Your professors’ teaching assistants, or TAs, are another helpful resource. Wait, teaching assistant? Yes, I know what you’re thinking . . . “assistant”?

The last time a teacher of mine needed an assistant was preschool, and that was because every time she turned her back someone tried to eat glue. How hardcore could this professor really be if they need an “assistant”? But believe it or not, teaching assistants are the real deal, and can be very valuable resources. Most often they are upperclassmen or graduate students who are familiar with both the subject matter and the professor’s teaching style. Meetings with a TA are extremely useful and can help you to more thoroughly prepare for tests, papers etc.

All in all, the college world of academia is a whole new ball game. But, you can learn to adapt before you find yourself sleeping through a semester of class, and then trying to prepare for finals in a completely baffled state. It is important to realize that upon entering the college classroom you are leaving behind a set of norms, but you are also entering into a new culture of classroom norms. You aren’t having cupcakes for kids’ birthdays, saying the Pledge of Allegiance every morning or even getting sent to the principal’s office for passing notes in class. Now the ball is in your court. You will be provided with the tools to make the most of Intro to Biology, Calculus I, Intro to Economics and all the rest. It is now up to you to take the proper steps to benefit and grow as much as you can. It is up to you to learn how much time you need to budget for the reading, how often you need to consult the professor for help and, most importantly, how many cups of coffee you need to stay awake for a nine a.m. Biology lecture.

**Even though there’s
no roll call, you
still have to
roll out of
bed on time!**